

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY SAIGON

USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 VIENTIANE 8339

LIMDIS

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, LA

SUBJECT: LAO POLITICAL SCENE AS SOUVANNA RETURNS

BEGIN SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER SOUVANNA PHOUMA RETURNED TO LAOS NOVEMBER 1, HAVING SPENT ALMOST TEN WEEKS IN FRANCE CONVALESCING FROM THE HEART ATTACK HE SUFFERED JULY 12. DURING HIS ABSENCE, THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION (PGNU) FUNCTIONED MORE EFFECTIVELY THAN ANTICIPATED, WITH THE VIENTIANE SIDE AND THE LAO PATRIOTIC FRONT WORKING TOGETHER BY COMPROMISE AND AVOIDING CONTENTIOUS EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ISSUES. THIS EXPERIENCE HAS PROBABLY STRENGTHENED PGNU BY PROVING IT COULD FUNCTION WITHOUT SOUVANNA, WHO HAD BEEN CONSIDERED INDISPENSABLE ELEMENT. HOWEVER, SOUVANNA'S RETURN MAY NOW BREAK THE SURFACE CALM BECAUSE CONTENTIOUS ISSUES THAT HAVE BEEN SHELVED WILL

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NOW HAVE TO BE DEALT WITH. END SUMMARY

1. SOUVANNA'S ILLNESS AND THE PGNU REACTION: THE SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE OF SOUVANNA, THE INDISPENSABLE MAN WHO HAD MADE PEACE AND RECONCILIATION POSSIBLE, REAWAKENED ALL THE MUTUAL FEARS AND DISTRUST OF BOTH SIDES. IT CREATED A TOTALLY CHANGED SITUATION. THE TWO FACTIONS, WHICH HAD WARRED WITH EACH OTHER FOR OVER FIFTEEN YEARS, HAD ABRUPTLY LOST THE ONE COMMON DENOMINATOR WHICH HAD BROUGHT THEM TOGETHER. THE ELEMENT OF COMPROMISE WAS GONE, AND THE QUESTION AROSE WHETHER THE DELICATELY-ERECTED GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE COULD SURVIVE. IT DID AND IN DOING SO SHED AN ILLUMINATING LIGHT ON THE LAO POLITICAL SCENE.

2. THE RESPONSE OF THE VIENTIANE SIDE AND PATHET LAO WAS QUINTESENTIALLY LAO. THEY MAINTAINED THE PRINCIPLE OF UNANIMITY. PHOUMI WAS NOT NAMED "ACTING PRIME MINISTER" ON SOUVANNA'S DEPARTURE, BUT "IN CHARGE OF CURRENT AFFAIRS OF THE PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL." BOTH SIDES REITERATED REPEATEDLY THEIR CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE PRINCIPLES OF PEACE AND NATIONAL RECONCILIATION EMBODIED IN THE VIENTIANE ACCORDS AND PROTOCOL AND THEIR DEVOTION TO SOUVANNA AS THE EMBODIMENT OF THESE PRINCIPLES. THE TWO DEPUTY PRIME MINISTERS, PHOUMI VONGVICHIT AND LEUAM INSISIENGMAI, EXERTED THEMSELVES TO KEEP CABINET MEETINGS CONSTRUCTIVE AND CALM DISCUSSIONS WHENEVER THEY BECAME ACRIMONIOUS. AS A SYMBOL OF THIS MUTUAL DESIRE TO PRE-SERVE AN AMICABLE ATMOSPHERE, PHOUMI CHOSE NOT TO SIT IN SOUVANNA'S CHAIR WHEN PRESIDING AT CABINET MEETINGS.

3. PHOUMI'S DECISION TO LEAD THE LAO DELEGATION TO THE UNGA IN LATE SEPTEMBER WAS A GOOD INDICATION OF LPF CONFIDENCE THAT LAOS WAS NOT ON THE VERGE OF A RIGHTIST COUP ATTEMPT. UNTIL THEN, NO PATHET LAO MINISTER HAD GONE OUTSIDE LUANG PRABANG AND VIENTIANE EXCEPT TO VISIT SAM NEUA. AT THE SAME TIME THE OPISODE SHOWED THAT THE PATHET LAO HAD LOST NONE OF ITS DETERMINATION TO MAINTAIN ITS POLICY LINE. THE UNGA SPEECH DELIVERED BY PHOUMI AND APPROVED BY SOUVANNA (UNDER CIRCUMSTANCES NOT YET CLEAR) STUCK CLOSE TO THE LPF LINE ON THE GRUNK AND PRG. THE WHOLE AFFAIR CONSIDERABLY UPSET THE VIENTIANE SIDE BECAUSE

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THEY REALIZED THAT THEY HAD BEEN OUTMANEUVERED BY PHOUMI WHO HAD GENERALLY IGNORED THE SUBSTANTIVE CHANGES MADE BY THEM TO THE DRAFT.

4. THIS PERIOD ALSO BROUGHT OUT EVEN MORE CLEARLY THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE PL POSITION. AS NOTED ABOVE, THE PL MINISTERS WENT OUT OF THEIR WAY TO MAINTAIN COOPERATIVE RELATIONS IN THE CABINET. AFTER A FEW MONTHS OF OFFICE,

THEY HAVE BEGUN TO APPRECIATE THE COMPLEXITIES OF RUNNING A GOVERNMENT AND HAVE DISPLAYED A GREATER WILLINGNESS TO WORK WITH THE BUREAUCRACY, WHICH BELONGS TO THE VIENTIANE SIDE, AND WITH FOREIGN DONORS, PARTICULARLY THE U.S. CONFRONTED BY A SERIES OF LABOR DISPUTES, PL MINISTERS INDICATED THAT, WHILE THEY SYMPATHIZED WITH THE WORKERS' PLIGHT, THEY BELIEVED STRIKES WERE NOT IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST AND JOINED THEIR VIENTIANE SIDE COLLEAGUES IN CALLING FOR SACRIFICES INSTEAD OF PAY RAISES. PL RELATIONS WITH THE AMERICAN MISSION HAVE ALSO WARMED CONSIDERABLY OVER THE LAST SIX MONTHS. THE PL HAVE CONSISTENTLY SOUGHT THE MAINTENANCE OF U.S. ASSISTANCE AND IN NUMEROUS FIELDS AND ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS HAVE SOUGHT U.S. ADVICE AND AID.

5. AT THE SAME TIME, AS SHOWN BY PHOUMI'S SPEECH BEFORE THE UNGA, THE PL ARE MAINTAINING THEIR POLICIES. THE TRUE LEADERSHIP OF THE MOVEMENT REMAINS IN SAM NEUA AND THE PL

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LEADERS, INCLUDING THE MINISTERS, IN VIENTIANE APPEAR

TO REMAIN UNDER THEIR DIRECTIVE. RADIO PATHET LAO HAS MAINTAINED THE LEVEL OF ITS ATTACKS AGAINST THE U.S., THAILAND, ULTRARIGHTISTS OF THE VIENTIANE SIDE AND PARTICULARLY DEFENSE MINISTER SISOUK. ALTHOUGH FOR A TIME THE FEAR OF COUPS APPEARED TO HAVE SUBSIDED, IN THE LAST TEN DAYS THE PL'S OLD PARANOIA ON THIS SUBJECT HAS SURFACED AGAIN. FINALLY, WHILE THE PL MINISTERS HAVE TAKEN A STATESMANLIKE STANCE REGARDING THE STRIKES, THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT THERE STRIKES HAVE BEEN FOMENTED AND ENCOURAGED BY THE PL, WHO HAVE WORKED CLOSELY WITH THE LEADERS OF THE VARIOUS FEDERATIONS, NOTABLY THE STUDENTS' AND THE LAO LABOR FEDERATION.

6. PERHAPS THE MOST POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN THESE LAST WEEKS WAS THE PL'S DECISION TO MOVE AHEAD ON AN EXCHANGE OF POWS. UNTIL THEN, THEY HAD MAINTAINED A FIRM POSITION THAT THE PROTOCOL HAD TO BE IMPLEMENTED STEP BY STEP:
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FIRST, BY THE NEUTRALIZATION OF LUANG PRABANG AND VIENTIANE; SECOND, BY THE INSTALLATION OF 27 BOUNDARY MARKERS BETWEEN THE TWO ZONES. ONLY AFTER THESE FIRST TWO STEPS HAD BEEN TAKEN COULD THERE BE A DISCUSSION OF POWS, MIAS AND OTHER MATTERS. ALTHOUGH THE TWO CITIES ARE STILL NOT NEUTRALIZED TO THE PL'S SATISFACTION, AND, ALTHOUGH ONLY 4 MARKERS HAVE BEEN IMPLANTED, THE PL SUDDENLY RELAXED THEIR POSITION AND PROCEEDED WITH THE POW RELEASES IN SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER IN A BUSINESS-LIKE AND COOPERATIVE FASHION. THE PL ARE NOW INDICATING THAT THEY MAY BE PREPARED TO DISCUSS THE RETURN OF REFUGEES; THE REOPENING OF ROADS, NOTABLY ROUTE 7 TO NORTH VIET-NAM AND ROUTE 13 NORTH OF THAKHEK; AND POSSIBLY EVEN MIAS. THESE INDICATIONS OF GREATER PL FLEXIBILITY SEEM TO REVEAL A GROWING PL CONFIDENCE IN THE STABILITY OF THE CEASEFIRE AND GENERALLY OF THE SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY.

7. VIENTIANE SIDE: CONCERNS ON THE VIENTIANE SIDE OVER SOUVANNA'S DEPARTURE FOR FRANCE SUBSIDED WITH THE REALIZATION THAT THE PL, WHATEVER THEIR LONG-TERM INTENTIONS, WERE PREPARED TO WORK WITHIN PGNU FRAMEWORK. THE VIENTIANE SIDE ALSO REALIZED THAT ITS BASIC CONTROL OF THE GOVERNMENTAL BUREAUCRACY IS A SUBSTANTIAL ASSET AND THAT THE PL CANNOT MANIPULATE THE PGNU AS EASILY AS HAD BEEN FEARED WHEN THE PL FIRST CAME TO TOWN. (PER CONTRA, PL MAY ALSO HAVE REACHED SAME CONCLUSION, WHICH WOULD EXPLAIN THEIR REPORTED FOMENTATION OF STRIKES AIMED AT SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS.) HOWEVER, THE "VIENTIANE SIDE FRONT" ESTABLISHED ON JULY 4. HAS NOT EMERGED AS A STRONG OR VIABLE POLITICAL FORCE, CAPABLE OF OFFSETTING THE PL ORGANIZATION. SPECIFICALLY, IT HAS NOT MANAGED TO PULL ALL NON-COMMUNIST

ELEMENTS FULLY INTO THE FOLD, NOR TO GET SUCH LEADING PERSONALITIES AS SISOUK, LEUAM AND CHAO SOPSAISANA TO WORK IN HARMONY. NEVERTHELESS, VIENTIANE SIDE MEMBERS OF THE PGNU, THE JOINT NATIONAL POLITICAL COUNCIL (JNPC) AND THE JOINT CENTRAL COMMISSION TO IMPLEMENT THE ACCORDS (JCCIA) HAVE BEEN COORDINATING THEIR ACTIVITIES MORE CLOSELY THAN IN THE PAST. FOR EXAMPLE, THE VIENTIANE SIDE HOLDS A STRATEGY SESSION BEFORE EACH WEEKLY CABINET MEETING AND IS THUS PREPARED TO MEET THE PATHET LAO ON A MORE EVEN FOOTING. (IN THIS CONTEXT, TIANETHONE CHANTHARASY, CONFIDENTIAL

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, IS COMING TO WEILD INCREASING INFLUENCE, ALTHOUGH THE MAIN LEADERS REMAIN NGON AND SISOUK. LEUAM HAS PROVED HIMSELF A WEAK LEADER WHOSE PRINCIPAL DESIRE APPEARS TO BE TO AVOID DIFFICULTIES AND CONFRONTATIONS.) INCREASED COOPERATION AMONG VIENTIANE SIDE LEADERS STILL DOES NOT OFFSET THE DISCIPLINED ORGANIZATION OF THE PL. VIENTIANE SIDE POLITICS CONTINUE TO REVOLVE LARGELY AROUND INDIVIDUALS AND NOT AROUND ORGANIZED POLITICAL PARTIES.

8. PRINCIPAL ISSUES: FROM ALL REPORTS, SOUVANNA HAS MADE A SUBSTANTIAL RECOVERY FROM HIS HEART ATTACK, BUT WILL REMAIN A PHYSICALLY DIMINISHED MAN. THERE IS GENERAL RECOGNITION OF THIS FACT AND A GENERAL DESIRE TO PROTECT HIM FROM THE PRESSURES OF DIFFICULT ISSUES. NEVERTHELESS, THEY DO EXIST AND SOME WILL HAVE TO BE DEALT WITH BEFORE TO VIENTIANE FROM LUANG PRABANG (WHERE HE WILL GO ON NOVEMBER 14 FOR FURTHER REST.) THESE ARE THE ISSUES:

A. EIGHTEEN POINTS - JNPC HAS REPORTEDLY DECIDED TO NOTIFY THE PGNU THAT IT CANNOT ACCEPT ANY CHANGES IN THE 18 POINTS, WHEREAS SOUVANNA IS KNOWN TO HAVE ENDORSED A SLIGHTLY WATERED-DOWN VERSION OF THE DOCUMENT BEFORE HE LEFT LAOS. SOUPHANOUVONG ALSO PLANS TO HAVE THE JNPC PROMULGATE A SERIES OF "IMPLEMENTING DOCUMENTS" TO GO WITH THE 18 POINTS. THE VIENTIANE SIDE, WEAKLY REPRESENTED IN THE JNPC, IS NOT APT TO MODIFY SOUPHANOUVONG'S THRUST. AT THE SAME TIME, VIENTIANE SIDE LEADERS HERE TAKE THIS WHOLE MATTER SERIOUSLY; ACCEPTANCE OF 18 POINTS AND DOCUMENTS PRODUCED BY JNPC WOULD IN THEIR VIEW BE TANTAMOUNT TO ACCEPTING PL PROGRAM. EVENTUALLY, SOUVANNA WILL HAVE TO ARBITRATE MATTER.

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B. NATIONAL ASSEMBLY - BEFORE HE LEFT LAOS, SOUVANNA SENT A DRAFT ROYAL ORDINANCE TO LUANG PRABANG WHICH PROVIDED FOR DISSOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. THE DRAFT WAS RETURNED TO THE CABINET BECAUSE OF FAULTY PROCEDURE BUT THE NEED FOR A PGNU BUDGET APPROVED BY SOME LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY MAKES THE RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM MORE THAN ACADEMIC. FURTHERMORE, THE KING APPARENTLY FEELS DEEPLY THAT THIS IS A CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUE, AND REPORTEDLY HE WOULD NOT AGREE TO A DISSOLUTION WITHOUT AN EXPLICIT AGREEMENT ON A LEGAL PROCEDURE TO REPLACE THE ASSEMBLY. ELECTIONS ARE THE NORMAL PROCEDURE, BUT NEITHER SIDE APPEARS KEEN ON HOLDING THEM UNDER PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES.

C. THE GRUNK AND PRG ISSUES: - THE PL MAY WELL REVIVE THE ISSUE OF RECOGNITION OF THE PRG AND GRUNK. NEITHER HAS BEEN FORMALLY DECIDED BY THE CABINET, BUT IF
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NOTHING ELSE THE KHMER REPRESENTATION QUESTION AT THE UN WILL PLACE THE MATTER BEFORE THE CABINET THIS MONTH. ALTHOUGH THERE IS SLIM CHANCE THAT THE PGNU MIGHT SUPPORT THE ASIAN RESOLUTION, ABSTENTION REMAINS THE MOST LIKELY COURSE; IT IS THE LEAST UNSETTLING IN DOMESTIC POLITICAL TERMS AND CAN BE PORTRAYED AS CONSISTENT WITH LAO NEUTRALITY.

9. OTHER ISSUES COULD EQUALLY WELL INTRUDE ON SOUVANNA'S CONVALESCENCE. PHOUMI'S SPEECH TO THE UNGA HAS STUCK IN THE VIENTIANE SIDE CRAW AND MIGHT BE RAISED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PGNU'S FOREIGN POLICY AS IT IS RELATED TO GRUNK AND PRG. LABOR DISPUTES AND PARTICULARLY THEIR TARGETTING OF SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS HAVE NOT REALLY BEEN SETTLED. OTHER DISPUTES MAY BREAK OUT. THE STUDENTS ARE BEGINNING TO STIR IN LUANG PRABANG AND PAKSE. THESE ARE THE KIND OF ISSUES THAT MAY REQUIRE SOUVANNA'S PRESTIGE TO RESOLVE.

10. INEVITABLY, AS ALREADY REPORTED IN REFTTEL, SOUVANNA'S ILLNESS HAS CAUSED SPECULATION ON HIS SUCCESSION. SOUP-HANOUVONG HAS RECENTLY AGAIN MET WITH SISOUK AND FAR GENERALS AND TOOK THE LOFTY GENERAL POSITION OF ADVOCATING PEACE AND NATIONAL RECONCILIATION, BUT ON DIFFICULT ISSUES FAILED TO SATISFY HIS AUDIENCE. PHENG PHONGSAVAN, THE MINISTER OF INTERIOR, HAS BEEN VISIBLY POSTURING HIMSELF AS A LIKELY CANDIDATE. HE TRAVELED TO FRANCE AND MOSCOW THIS SUMMER; HE REMAINS ON GOOD TERMS WITH THE U.S. AND CHINA; AND HE AVOIDS TAKING ANY POSITION THAT WOULD EXPOSE HIM TO CRITICISM BY ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER.

11. IN SUM, PGNU HAS SURVIVED SOUVANNA'S ABSENCE LARGELY THROUGH MUTUAL SELF-RESTRAINT OF TWO SIDES, AND AVOIDANCE OF DIVISIVE ISSUES. THESE WILL NOW HAVE TO BE DEALT WITH BY AN ENFEEBLED SOUVANNA. WE SHOULD THEREFORE EXPECT THE POLITICAL TEMPERATURE TO RISE IN NEXT FEW WEEKS.
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